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ABSTRACT

A study in two South African schools investigated the impact of encouraging free, voluntary reading on the English language skills of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners. Subjects were 139 fourth- through seventh-grade students in an experimental group and 105 students in a control group. Pretests of reading comprehension were administered to each group. After 8 months of instruction, posttests were administered. The experimental group was encouraged to read in periods set aside for free reading. The control group, while given similar ESL instruction, were not provided with free reading periods. Results indicate that while the fourth- through sixth-grade levels in the experimental group gained in reading comprehension, only the fourth and sixth grades gained more than the control group. There was no correlation, in the experimental group, between degree of improvement and quantity of free reading done. Recommendations for further research include use of larger experimental and control groups, better group monitoring, and better records of class reading activities. Additional ways to encourage free voluntary reading are suggested. Contains 16 references. (MSE)

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**DETERMINING THE EFFECT OF FREE VOLUNTARY READING ON ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE READERS IN SOUTH AFRICA: report on research conducted in primary schools**

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## Introduction

In South Africa during the apartheid era people had to to live in areas according to their race. The schools in the areas zoned for black Africans were poorly equipped and many of the teachers in these schools were inadequately trained.

Although education authorities in the new South African government want to improve the quality of education by inter alia improving literacy levels, encouraging critical thinking and producing lifelong learners they do not necessarily see that this could be achieved primarily through encouraging the reading of stories and the establishment and maintenance of school libraries with a variety of relevant resources. There is a lack of funds and the priorities are more classrooms, equipment and teacher training.

Although considerable research has been carried out abroad as to the effect of free voluntary reading on language acquisition and development of English second language learners (ESL) very little research in this field has been done in South

Africa (Elley 1991; Krashen 1993). The researchers thought it would be particularly appropriate to do a research project of this nature at the present time when education systems, teaching methods and syllabi are being changed. The aim of the research project was to establish the effect of free voluntary reading of English books by African pupils in primary school on their English second language acquisition and comprehension.

Research reported by Wells (1986) shows how important it is to develop emergent literacy skills during the pre-school years, but many South Africa pupils enter school lacking these skills. Elley (1989:177) has shown that reading aloud is an important source of incidental English second-language learning. In South African schools the teaching of reading has largely focused on skills, strategies and the processes individual readers acquire and use as they interact with a piece of text. Emphasis is on decoding skills rather than deriving meaning from a piece of text or developing a love of reading. School-based reading and language programmes provide little opportunity for students to read for pleasure.

**Reasons for a Free Voluntary Reading programme**

Studies on reading clearly show that not only does reading enhance literacy development but that it is the best way to become a good reader, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, and internalize advanced grammar (Krashen

1993). It has also been found that direct instruction is usually less effective in teaching language skills than free voluntary reading and this is particularly true of second language teaching.

Research emphasizes the importance of a favourable attitude to reading from the point of view of developing the habit of leisure reading. Unlike many other variables a child's attitude to reading can be positively affected by teachers within the classroom by providing suitable material and opportunities to read for pleasure (Greaney & Hegarty 1987: 17).

Krashen (1989:454) points out that if reading is such an effective activity there is a need for better stocked libraries. As public libraries are often inaccessible to Africans, the importance of the school library in the promotion of FVR cannot be sufficiently emphasized. The size of the school library is also directly linked to reading ability, thus it is a prerequisite that a large collection of books is available in order for the reading programme to be effective (Elley and Mangubhai 1983:66). Nine evaluative studies of a "book flood" approach, which entails exposing pupils to large quantities of high-interest story books, provided evidence of rapid improvements in reading and listening comprehension. In addition, these improvements appear in all aspects of the pupil's target language (Elley 1991:408).

## Methodology

For the research project a literature survey of relevant aspects was carried out. The empirical part of the project consisted of data collection by means of pre- and post-tests given to pupils in four standards in an experimental and control school. Subsequently some of the pupils participating in the project were given in-depth interviews.

## Research project

There were 139 pupils participating in the study in the experimental school and 105 pupils in the control school. The children were all being taught in English even though this was not their home language. To ensure the validity of the survey results it would have been desirable to have classes of equal size and with other variables as similar as possible, but unfortunately it was impossible to find two such similar groups. Conditions in the control school appeared to be more favourable, for example all the classes were smaller.

At the beginning of the project the children's comprehension was tested by means of a reading test. The reading test was specially developed for ESL readers taking into account cultural variables. The project ran for eight months and at the end of this period the pupils' reading comprehension was tested again. In order to allow for natural progression progress was measured against the control school which did not

have free voluntary reading and had relied on standard language teaching methods only.

Motivation was an essential factor if the project was to succeed because most of the children come from families that do not have a reading culture. In addition, the children are required to read in a second language. The researchers decided that the best way to motivate the children to read would be to run a competition for all the children with book prizes for the five children in each class who read the most books by the end of the eight month period.

Before starting the project a circular letter was sent to the parents of all the pupils in Stds 2 to 5 (4th to 7th year) in the experimental school. This letter informed the parents of the nature of the research project, explained the purpose of the project and why the researchers and school staff wanted to encourage reading. The assistance of the parents was sought in motivating and encouraging their children to read as much as possible during the year.

Although both the experimental and control schools had school libraries, these libraries did not have books that were suitable for ESL readers. A further problem was that the schools had previously catered only for white pupils and the books had few characters with which African ESL readers could identify. As the children participating in the project were unlikely to have a strong motivation to read it was essential

that the books be as accessible and attractive to these children as possible. It was therefore decided that a specially selected collection of books taking into account the children's reading level, cultural background, and interests be provided for these children. This collection was donated to the experi-mental school by READ (Read Educate and Develop - an NGO working in the field of literacy and teacher training) and a similar collection was donated to the control school after the project had been completed. The publishers Shuter and Shooter donated a reading scheme containing cards with specially developed stories and questions to the experimental school.

The teachers in the experimental school still spent periods on grammar, spelling and written work, but periods were set aside for FVR. Pupils talked about books they had read as part of their oral work and were allowed to read story cards or books in class when their written work was done. According to the teachers the parents were cooperative and did not mind their children spending some school time on the reading of books and stories. These teachers in the experimental school believe that reading is the most important factor in second language learning and comprehension, but a major problem experienced is that the actual school time which could be spent on reading was very limited because the syllabus had to be followed. The Std 2 teacher said that she sometimes "made time for reading and read a story at the end of the day just for enjoyment".

To obtain more information on the socio-cultural factors that could have made a difference to the pupils' reading achievement 25 pupils were interviewed in depth early in 1996.

**Results**

In each standard pupils answered four comprehension tests (graded for the specific standard) which each had 5 multiple choice questions and 5 open-ended questions. A pupil could score a possible 15 marks per test if all questions were correctly answered, therefore on four tests the maximum possible score would be 60 marks. Different statistical tests such as analysis of variance and correspondence analysis were carried out using a computer program in order to obtain different perspectives on the data available.

**Interpretation of the results**

The duration of the project was over a limited period of eight months - more follow-up tests would be required over a longer period to obtain valid data. Obviously most of the pupils improved, and the Std 2, 3 and 4 classes in the experimental school show a good overall improvement. However only the Std 2 and 4 classes show a significant difference in overall improvement when compared to the pupils in the control school. The improvement of pupils in each standard in both schools for each of the four tests and the overall improvement is shown in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4.

FIGURE 1 Improvement: Standard 2

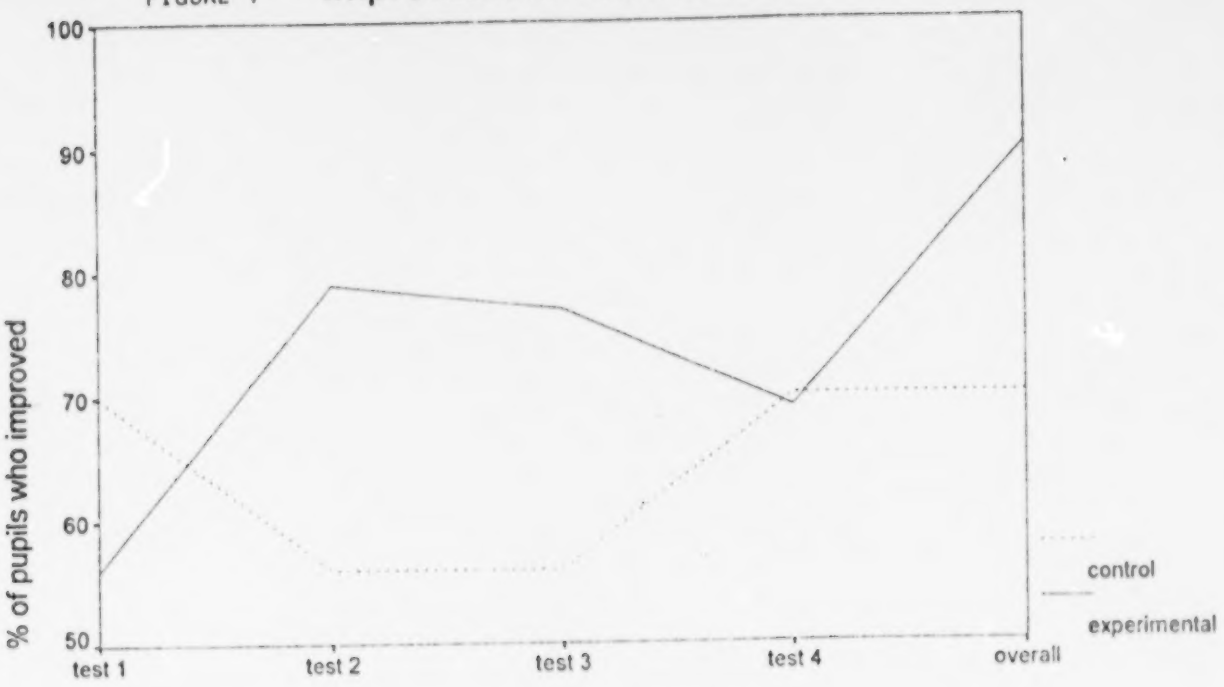



FIGURE 2 Improvement: Standard 3

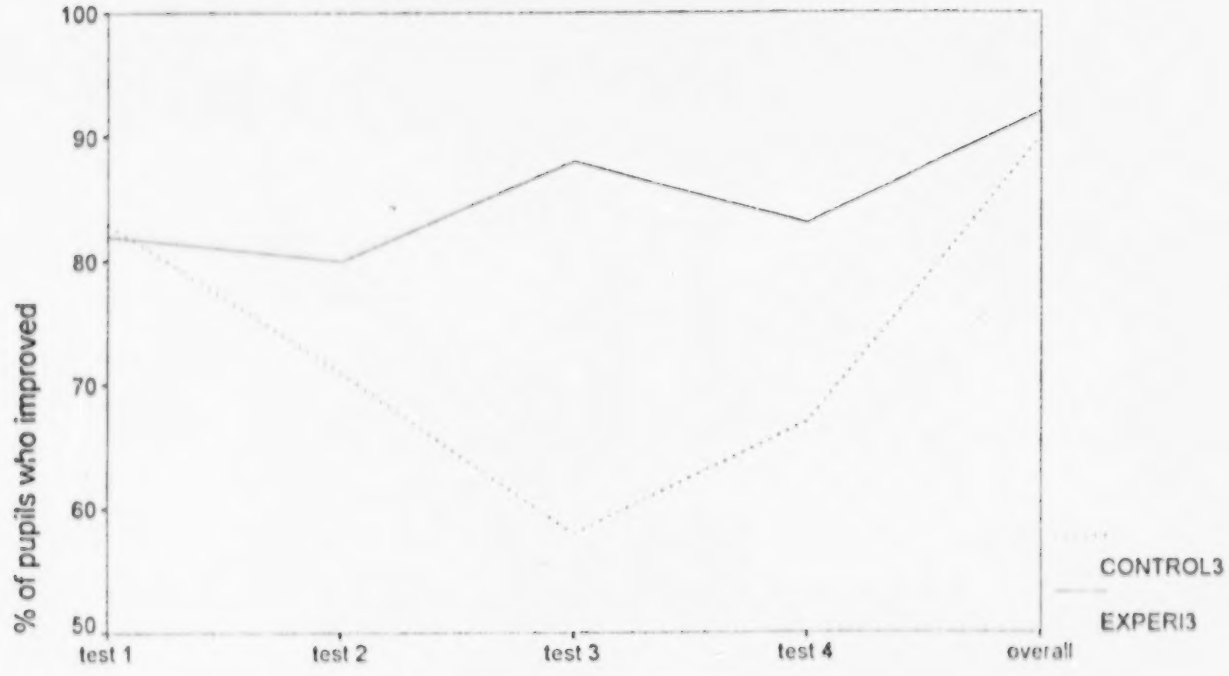


FIGURE 3 Improvement: Standard 4

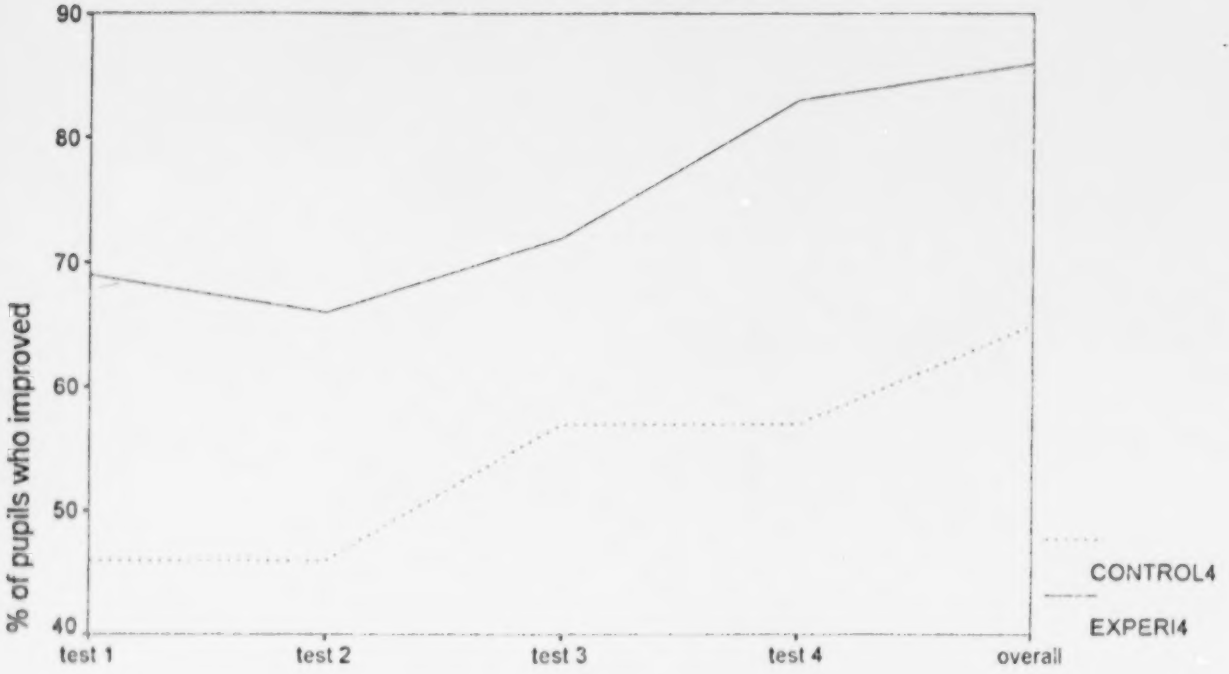
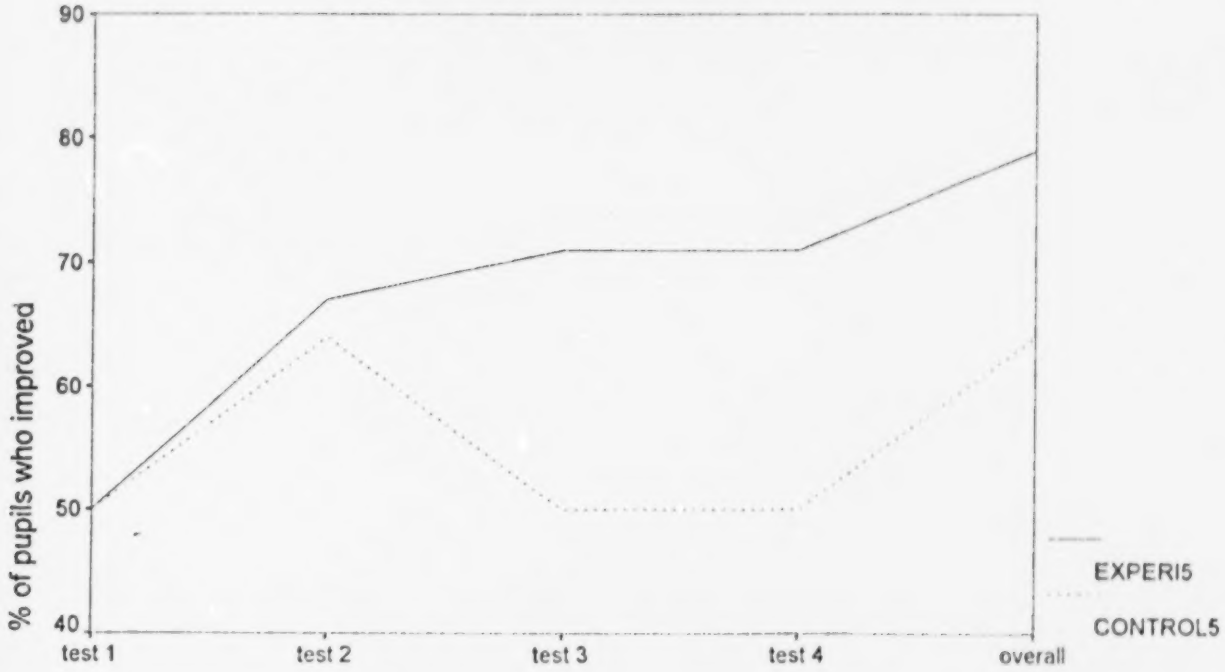



FIGURE 4 Improvement: Standard 5



Younger children may be more easily motivated to do free voluntary reading and develop the reading habit - by Std 5 (or even Std 4) children may be less prepared to spend time on free voluntary reading (especially at home), because these habits have not been formed at an early age. In fact this is probably why the pupils in Stds 2 and 3 show the greatest improvement in the mean scores obtained in November and why the overall improvement by the Std 5 class was not significant.

When the individual scores obtained by pupils in the first tests were ranked from highest to lowest and compared to the scores obtained the second time there was no correlation between the pupils who read the most and those who improved the most. Pupils who scored high marks the first time did not have as much scope for improvement. Also without knowing exactly what each pupil read one can only surmise that children who read the most were reading shorter, easier books than pupils who improved the most.

This may also happen during reading competitions and Readathons which require children to read a new book each time and do not encourage children to reread stories they have enjoyed or ensure understanding - in other words children will not necessarily have sufficient opportunity to internalize the structure of the story. Pupils participating in the project definitely experienced more problems with inferential than with literal questions.

From the data collected during the interviews the children all appeared to come from homes with relatively favourable conditions: the family size was generally small, parents were in white collar jobs, etc. The children spend most of their free time watching children's programmes or soap operas on television. Home literacy experience appears to be minimal with the number of books at home varying from five to 50. The children are not members of public libraries, their parents read mostly newspapers or popular magazines and no child could name a favourite book. There were no marked differences in the socio-economic conditions or literacy environment between pupils who had scored well and those who had done badly in the reading tests. One must conclude that this is the result of other factors and this aspect needs further investigation.

**Recommendations**

Larger numbers of pupils, at least 50 pupils per standard, should participate so that more appropriate statistical tests can be made. Classes in both control and experimental schools should not be significantly different at the start of the research and pupils in rural schools should be researched as well as those in urban areas.

The project was difficult to control. Although the teachers were very cooperative and motivated there was definitely a need for a research assistant to visit the school on a regular basis to discuss pupils' reading with them as teachers do not

have sufficient time for this activity. Full records of the different types of reading activities need to be kept as well as monitoring what pupils read. It is possible that pupils who made the most improvement read fewer, but more advanced books, while those who won the competition were reading shorter, easier ones. One cannot expect ESL pupils' reading comprehension to improve solely on the basis of voluntary reading. Teachers will need to do shared and paired reading, to spend more class time mediating stories and asking questions which require pupils to predict events and outcomes or make inferences, so that they are better able to understand narrative structures and causal relationships.

As so many children lack preliteracy skills, storytelling and reading aloud activities should commence as soon as children enter primary school. The books and cards to be read by children should be not only comprehensible, but also interesting and relevant. According to the teachers the pupils preferred using the classroom collection to borrowing books from the school library. The materials donated by READ and Shuter and Shooter fulfilled the requirements of ESL pupils. However, there were only 2,4 books per pupil and one reading scheme which was used by two classes (Stds 3 and 4). Ideally there need to be at least 7 books per pupils. Also an appropriate reading scheme for each class is needed because of the reading and language support provided on each card.

Taking the findings of the literature survey into account; the

lack of public libraries; the need to motivate pupils to read; and the need for careful monitoring of pupils' reading; there is a very important role for the teacher-librarian in the school. This person has the expertise to select appropriate books, can arrange for block loans to classrooms, promote reading using a variety of methods and help individual pupils to find books they enjoy and which challenge them. The teacher-librarian also has opportunities to demonstrate to pupils that information on a specific topic can be found in several sources. Unfortunately in cash-strapped countries where there are many demands for basic facilities, a school library and a teacher-librarian are perceived as luxuries that cannot be afforded. Nevertheless, both the school library and the teacher-librarian have a crucial role to play in the promotion of a culture of reading and learning.

The researchers believe that while an occasional Readathon may be very motivational for pupils, it is not desirable to hold these too often or to place too much emphasis on the numbers of books young pupils read. For reading comprehension to improve it is important for pupils to internalise story structures and to understand relationships. When a pupil enjoys a story he or she should be encouraged to reread the story and to share it with family or friends. Sets which contain a big book and several little books are ideal for this purpose. The teacher can read the story to a group of children who are able to simultaneously see the pictures. Then pupils can read the little books themselves and this provides the

opportunity to reread an already familiar story.

One of the greatest problems is that a project of this nature must be carried out *within* the established educational system. Teachers are required to follow a definite syllabus and therefore time spent on reading activities is of necessity very limited. It is also difficult to involve teachers other than language teachers and ideally one would hope for reading activities to be integrated into all subject teaching. This is obviously also easier to achieve if there is a motivated teacher-librarian in the school and if the education department has a policy which supports such activities.

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